



VOICE VALUE

By Robin Springer

Pandemic Gives a Glimpse of Life with a Disability

The day-to-day just got more complicated for us all

Q uarantined? Safer at home? Can't leave the house? Are you stressed? Frustrated? Concerned about your financial future?

Welcome to the world of people with disabilities.

Let's face it, when you have a disability, things take longer and cost more. People with disabilities (PWD) are often stuck at home, unable to get to the market or go to the movies. They are unable to work because employers insist telecommuting is not feasible.

If PWD want food, they may have to use Instacart or other delivery options. They may have to venture out of the house, putting themselves at risk of catching an illness. Or the excursion may take so much energy they end up in bed recovering for days.

Many of us are now encountering what PWD go through every single day. And while businesses are making sincere efforts to provide accommodations, the accommodations are not necessarily helpful. As an analogy to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), this is the difference between being compliant and being accessible.

We can emerge with a new perspective of the challenges people face daily.

For example, many stores are offering extended shopping hours for seniors and people with medical conditions. It's a great gesture, but the extended hours are typically before the store opens to the public, often as early as 6 a.m. and typically no later than 8 a.m. The problem is, it can be difficult or impossible for people with profound disabilities to complete their morning routines and get to the store so early.

For someone with a sensory disability, waiting in a long line with people shuffling or cars idling or shopping carts clanking around them can be overwhelming to the point of being incapacitating.

People who do not have outwardly obvious medical conditions could easily be mistaken for able-bodied individuals trying to game the system. And standing in line for an extended period of time can trigger flare-ups for those with chronic pain, fibromyalgia, and other disorders.

Earlier this year I read a thread on social media about a coffee shop in Northern California that was closing its doors because it was being sued after years of violating the ADA.

The thread presented the facts a bit differently, though: The coffee shop has been a beloved small business for many years. There were stairs to the entrance from day one. The

guy who sued the coffee shop was unable to access the shop because there was no ramp, and he was in a wheelchair so he couldn't get inside. But you know what? His friend was able to skip up the steps and get the guy his coffee. The poor coffee shop owners are being run out of town because this guy isn't satisfied even though he got his coffee, just not in the manner he preferred. Ungrateful disabled person.

But what if the trip to the coffee shop wasn't about the cup of coffee? What if it was about discussing a business deal? What if it was to say goodbye before leaving on an extended trip, or to celebrate finally being out of the hospital and well enough to sit in a coffee shop and visit with a friend?

And, by the way, an ADA violation would never trigger the closure of a business based on the facts presented.

Contextualizing this for able-bodied people might go something like this:

During the pandemic, you couldn't find toilet paper at the market? Target didn't have it either? Why are you complaining? Just head over to Costco. You had to wait in line again and they were out anyway, you say? Hmm. Order it online at Amazon or Walmart. They're not shipping toilet paper? Guess you better suck it up.

Do you get it now?

It's not about the beloved coffee shop on the corner and the villainous disabled guy who ran the joint out of business because he wasn't satisfied having his friend fetch his coffee.

It's about real people. It's about real problems. It's about real discrimination.

Listening tends to be hard for people. But now that we all have had a deeper experience of vulnerability, it might refine our listening skills, including the ways we listen to the needs of PWD.

We can race out of this pandemic eager to get back to life as we knew it, oblivious to the similarities we share with vulnerable communities, or we can emerge with a new perspective of the challenges people face daily.

Let's choose wisely. And let's use this unprecedented time in our history to create a more compassionate, more understanding, and more accessible society. ☒

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